

Tom Scheck, *Minnesota Public Radio*

Washington D.C. - Every 10 years, the Minnesota Legislature and the governor have to create new districts for the state's members of Congress and other lawmakers based on population shifts in the Census.

Minnesota's eight members of the U.S. House are watching the process closely and working behind the scenes to make sure they play a role in the process.

The game of political musical chairs is about to begin. The good news is that Minnesota didn't lose a congressional seat. But to ensure equal representation, the makeup of the eight congressional districts will have to change as the Constitution requires that all House members represent the same number of people.

Over the past decade, some districts have grown faster than others. The Census Bureau hasn't released official population estimates yet, but that hasn't stopped Minnesota's Congressional delegation from weighing in.

"I've been watching it very, very carefully," said Democratic Rep. Keith Ellison. "Redistricting is a huge issue for us. It's very, very important."

Ellison represents Minnesota's 5th Congressional District, which includes Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs. Projections a couple years ago showed Ellison's district coming up short in terms of population. If those numbers hold, the 5th District will need to add about 45,000 people from surrounding districts.

"I'm hoping to go in some areas that are traditionally moderate to Republican areas because I feel that the policies I represent and the ideas that I'm fighting for could be better understood even in districts like that," Ellison said.

Five of the state's eight congressional districts need to pick up population. Republican Chip Cravaack may be wondering if the northeastern Minnesota district that he won last fall will be

the same 8th District when he faces re-election in two years.

"I'm trying to keep the 8th intact," Cravaack said. "I can grow a little to the south; I can grow a little bit to the west. I don't need that many. I need about 13,000 votes so I don't need to really change that much."

The problem for Cravaack and the other members of the delegation is that they don't have a formal say in the matter. That means the delegation has to try to keep tabs on what the Minnesota Legislature is doing 1,100 miles away from Washington.

Several members say they're providing advice to the Legislature and Gov. Mark Dayton on how the district boundaries should be drawn.

Democrat Betty McCollum knows her district, which includes St. Paul, will have to grow. She said her biggest concern is that Republicans who control the Legislature will try to draw a district that includes both Minneapolis and St. Paul -- setting up a fight between her and Ellison.

"We can have a discussion with the state legislators and say 'This doesn't need to be a fight.' We're lucky that we have eight seats," McCollum said. "It's fairly clear cut on who has to pick up and who has to lose and they're actually districts that are adjacent to each other."

The two districts that need to shrink are Minnesota's 2nd and 6th.

The 2nd, represented by Republican John Kline, includes the southern Twin Cities suburbs and exurbs. The 6th, represented by Republican Michele Bachmann, includes St. Cloud and the northern and eastern Twin Cities suburbs.

The question for state lawmakers is how to redraw those districts. Will conservative Sherburne County be drawn into Minnesota's 8th? That would help Cravaack. Will part of Scott County be absorbed by the 1st? That would make Democrat Tim Walz's seat more competitive.

The one member of Minnesota's delegation who doesn't seem concerned is Republican Congressman Erik Paulsen of the 3rd District.

"I haven't even looked that closely because I'm in a district that does not need to change population, actually," Paulsen said. "We still do not have the official numbers or the official data hasn't been even turned in to the state yet. So it's really too early in the process to stake out claims or guess where lines might be."

The population figures should be released in March. The Legislature will then go through the process of drawing the boundaries.

Dayton can either sign or veto their plan. If he vetoes the bill creating redrawn districts, the courts likely will have to step in and draw the lines.

If that happens, Minnesota's Congressional delegation will have another set of eyes determining their political fates.